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Verification and the president

By devoting a lengthy portion of Wednesday's New York speech on SALT-II to the "verification" issue, President Carter acknowledged that it has moved upward on the agenda of controversy.

"We are confident," he told the American Newspaper Publishers Association, "that no significant violation of the treaty could take place without the U.S. detecting it." Our capacity to monitor Soviet compliance with the treaty's terms, he said, "was certainly not lost with our observation stations in Iran."

The two electronic listening posts, casualties of the Islamic revolution, formerly tracked "telemetric" signals from a Soviet ICBM testing site at Turatam.

Whether their loss has impaired U.S. monitoring capacities, and how soon and in what way they can be replaced, is now a matter of some confusion. The Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Turner, is understood to have told the Senate Intelligence Committee that the loss is substantial and may take as long as five years to remedy. But that is not the view of President Carter, nor of Defense Secretary Harold Brown, who is "convinced that we're going to be able to verify a SALT agreement from the moment it is signed and ratified."

These views are not, perhaps, as contradictory as they appear. Admiral Turner distinguishes between "monitoring" (a technical function) and "verification" (a judgmental function) and he may have discussed the lost Iranian listening posts in isolation from alternative means of monitoring Soviet performance.

Whom to believe? How much does the loss of the Iranian stations matter? A couple of points occur to us.

First, the vital element in national security is the credibility of the president himself. He alone has ultimate responsibility for the nation's safety and must see that intelligence-gathering methods are adequate.

It is news to no one that two administrations of the past 16 years, each in different ways, greatly strained presidential credibility. But President

Carter came to office, as did Gerald Ford before him, mindful of the need to repair confidence in presidential assurances and, if one believes the polls, has largely succeeded in doing so. And that will matter fundamentally in the SALT-II debate.

Secondly, in "verification" judgment is the indispensable buttress of credibility. Is it sound political or strategic judgment for the president and Secretary Brown to seem to override the assessment of the nation's intelligence chief?

In any case, the confusion of counsel about the loss of the Iranian listening posts reminds us that the critical element in intelligence is not the raw data or the means of gathering it (important as both are), but evaluation. The necessarily secret methods of monitoring SALT compliance will be fully known to a relative handful of administration and congressional officials. Most of us will have to weigh the credibility of those who assure us they're adequate. What we must worry about is whether the administration has the will to make detached evaluations of strategic intelligence and to act on them, even at the risk of political inconvenience. Last year's inconclusive controversy over MIG-23s in Cuba suggests that judgments will differ; what would be thoroughly alarming is the discovery, even the suspicion, that they differ for essentially political reasons.

Which brings us back to square one. "Verification" is not entirely, or even chiefly, an issue of the adequacy of intelligence-gathering methods, for we must assume them to be so unless our leaders are rashly foolish. It is an issue of confidence in their judgment and word. When President Carter invokes presidential authority to assure us that we can, indeed, adequately monitor Soviet compliance with a SALT treaty, he lays his most valuable asset — credibility — on the line.

We must assume that he knows it, that he realizes that the Senate debate on the treaty could pivot on public confidence in the fearlessness and accuracy of his judgment. Here, then, is one place where a misstep, however unwitting, could be fatal to the treaty.